

t h r e e

## Because

car, a red port-hole hardtop Thunderbird. I come inside lugging my helmet like a spare head beneath my arm.

“What’ll it be?” Del wants to know. Vjay’s sitting here slumped.

They’re seated at these glasstopped picnic tables, some with red and white checked oilcloth, and candles in redglass vases. Behind us through the French doors is the old brick barbecue that is too rusted and busted up to use anymore.

“A beer,” I step over the bench seat and seat myself.

“Man wants a beer,” says Del. Vjay’s sitting here silently with his head down. It’s early, before noon, and the place is practically deserted except for Jimmy Wales Wirsching who owns Mad Antonio’s and whose name is neither Tony nor Anthony. I know him pretty well and nod when he brings us a beer.

Behind us is a little one-bedroom cottage. It’s maybe twenty by twenty, four hundred square feet, with a bedroom and a kitchenette and an indoor bathroom. It’s built out of those yellow knotty-pine panels, shiplapped and abutted like the vacation cabins you used to be able to rent in the flats across from the boardwalk in Santa Cruz. They aren’t there anymore.

Place looks barely big enough to be functional. The front door is open, showing an ante-room, and behind that is the room with the bed. Place looks like exactly what it is, a one-bedroom motel. There’s a white cotton bedspread with little puffy tufts in rows from the head to the foot of the bed, like sprigs of broccoli. There’s a lamp with an oilpaper shade that casts an orange, homey sort of light, and more of that pine furniture, sanded and varnished yellow. You expect to look out the window and see the glittering blue of the reservoir but instead there’s just the oystershell parking lot of Mad Antonio’s Nuthouse. There must be a billion beer cans out there, mashed flat by bikers’ boots and pickup tires, and inside Mad Antonio’s the floor is littered with spit and dirt and crushed peanut shells. I look at the room in the cottage and Del looks at it and Vjay doesn’t. In fact he sits with his back to it and gets up and goes to the unisex bathroom and comes back and sits back down

It’s not hard to understand how it starts, and how it ends.

It’s Vjay’s birthday. He’s sitting with Del inside Mad Antonio’s, a little place up in the hills by Caliban reservoir in the Santa Cruz mountains. It’s a biker place that’s burned down three times in its ninety or so years and they’ve built it back up each time. It’s remote enough out here they don’t bother to check IDs. If you’re old enough to walk in the front door—I come in from parking my bike out on the street. The lot itself is lined with choppers at one end and cluttered with Japanese rice-rockets at the other. The space in between a single



with his back still to it. Del's got a kind of a cruel smile. Because it's obvious something's bothering Vjay, maybe just knowing the room's there, the set of his back and neck and face and eyes and jaw. As if to say, what the hell's a thing like that doing in a place like this?

That's when we get the idea. The bed made and the TV playing something on the Western channel, one of those Clint Eastwood movies, and beyond is the little bathroom and it sounds like somebody's in there. That's when we get the idea, or maybe when we first see her. When we all see her coming out of the bathroom. Wiping her hands.



She walks out of the cottage and here into Mad Antonio's and she's wearing those tight calf-length britches women are wearing this year and a pair of red slingback wedgies with her toes peeking out. She's pretty good looking. That's when the idea comes over us, all simultaneously.

"So how much?" Del asks her.

~2~

She comes in, she's wearing a high-collar sleeveless blouse and those turquoise capri pants. These wedgeheels that clock across the floor towards us, the only people in the place this time of the morning.

She smiles down at us. "Fifty for you," she points. "Or you. Or you."

Fifty huh. Girl has a nice smile.

While we're deciding, she claims Del's Lucky Strike from between his fingers and takes a puff then looks at the three of us through the smoke. While we're making up our minds, she tells us Did we know she's applied to the university?

"University huh," Del lazes back in his seat. "What're you, like thirteen?"

She looks as though she's possibly eighteen. "Old enough," she blows smoke at us. Her breasts are round and full against the front of her blouse.

We can see that.

"I'm going to be a poetess," she exhales more smoke.

"A what?"

"I'm gonna write poems. Famous poems."

Del looks around. "About this?"

"May bee," she smiles. "Why not?"

"When you get to be fourteen and you're old enough to go to the university, huh," Del reclaims his cigarette from her. "But what about today?"

"What about right now," she replies.

~3~

So we check our wallets and together I have just barely enough. She tells us her name is Cynda Lynch and one day we're all going to hear of her.

"Hoh-kay," we say. Because we're not here for any poetry today.

"You're gonna have to front me," my brother Del rises, "because I don't got any bread."

So I do, then order myself another beer. There's just the two of us and Vjay's drumming the tabletop with the tips of his fingers. His face is pale green like he's going to be sick. "You okay?"

He nods silently.



“Because you look like you’re gonna puke,” I helpfully inform him then take another gulp of beer. What he looks like is been up all night drinking gut-rot wine on an empty stomach.

“You have anything to eat?” I ask. “How long you and Del been here?” Drinking, I mean.

He just shakes his head and drums the tables some more with his fingers.

The door to the cottage begins to creak slowly open. When we glance it’s dark inside and you can’t see anything and the curtains have been pulled for privacy. But we can hear the TV playing, and playing loud. Jimmy Wales the Nuthouse’s bartender glances at me then shrugs and reaches out and bangs the door closed.

Since it looks like we’re going to be here awhile, I decide to order lunch. Vjay says he still isn’t hungry. He says he has no appetite. He says he hasn’t had one for says. Months maybe even. “You don’t mind if I do,” I grin. He shakes his head with his eyes looking away from that front door. He’s got it bad.

And he’s pale as hell. “You really ought to get something in that stomach of yours,” I tell him. But he just sits here silently, playing that same old piano with his fingers.

Jimmy Wales arrives with lunch. I remember his name from the plasticized nametag he has sagging from the chest pocket of his floppy white shirt that’s marbled with splotches of various red salsas and chocolate molés. Good old fat Jimmy. He’s a transplanted Cajun from the Irish Channel in New Orleans but when he speaks you’d think he was fresh out of Brooklyn, those adenoidal dem, deese, and dose. Man can make a dynamite Poorboy though. Jimmy has a white cotton towel knotted under his sagging belly. He brings lunch: a big spicy bowl of menudo for what’s troubling me, along with a steaming platter of enchiladas. “That plate’s hot,” Jimmy warns. “It’s right out of the oven.” Little sideplatters of tacos and refritos and red rice. Jimmy isn’t exactly mexican but his wife is and this is most what she knows how to

cook. They don’t sell a lot of food here, mostly beer and peanuts, but what Esma the wife cooks she knows how to cook.

Vjay eyes me for a moment then looks away, his face a poisonous green. “Don’t do it here,” I warn him, swabbing up the remains of the enchilada with a flour tortilla.

Because I’m getting a little tired of all this. If he’s going to be sick he might as well get it over with. I slide the bowl of menudo, steam rising in spirals. “You know what menudo is?” I tell him. “Tripe. You know what tripe is? Cow’s stomach. Chow down,” I offer. The bleached white pieces of tripe in their red chili base look like lazy fish grazing in a pool of hot blood.

But he just sits here slumped.

Probably it’s at this moment I realize I won’t. For one thing, I don’t have the money to both eat and go back there. And for another. The idea of seconds.

The television goes off and about ten minutes later my brother Del comes out, his hair all slicked back like what he’s been doing in there is taking a shower. He’s grinning and he looks happy. He doesn’t have to say anything. Vjay’s looking at me and I’m looking back at him then I jerk my head at the room. Vjay gets up and steps through the door but he doesn’t look happy going in.

This time the radio bleats on. My brother leans back in his chair resting his head against a large grease-spot from a million other heads just like his. He has a lazy self-satisfied look that can sometimes be irritating to people who cannot, or will not, share in it, but this time it’s all right. You don’t turn twenty-one every day. We’re celebrating his just-off the two years parole.

My own birthday would be celebrated beyond the wire in an entirely nuther universe. And our one remaining brother, JW, has already left home. Got a government contract with a certain intelligence agency and he’s off in Persia somewhere working for a man named Shaw.



But that's another story. When he sees me eating, Del leans forward and waves his hand at Jimmy Wales that he wants the same. I check my wallet. It makes my money calculations tight and I wipe my mouth against the red cloth napkin they have folded in triangles at each setting, between the tall glass salt and pepper shakers. But what the hell. He's my brother. He sure looks happy.

While we're eating, the door to the cabin starts sneaking open again. They've forgotten to lock it again. There are a few people in here now, mostly bass fisherman from off the reservoir, and none of them know what's going on in there. But Del and I do. They've left the light on this time and there's a big dull wet spot in the middle of the empty bed that I don't believe I'll ever forget. Then there's this loud enormous squall, like somebody spanking a baby.

This time it's me who steps out and bangs the door shut.

Sometime later Vjay comes out. First she does then he does.

She's taken a shower and I have to admit, the girl does look good. She has this dark — black — hair and these big dark eyes, sort of tough-looking eyes. Bit of mascara to make her eyes even bigger. Eighteen maybe nineteen, in the hard light of the early afternoon. She has her hair tied up in a bandana exposing the swanlike arch of her neck and she has this madonna skin that goes down the neck of her blouse and and out the sleeves of her arms. Vjay's eyes are red. He's embarrassed. He's too embarrassed to even sit down with us. He's certain everyone in the place is looking at him, but they aren't. The longer he stands there in the doorway like that though, they sure will be. "Your friend, he is not so experience," is all she'll say, and for the first time I hear the tilt and lilt of her accent. I hadn't noticed it before. Poetess, huh. Sailing through the bar with fifty of my bucks already in her big worked-leather bag and letting the outside screen door slam. She has a bagful of stuff, clothes and underwear and stuff, that she tosses into the

red Thunderbird. Then she comes sailing back in again and all this time Vjay's kind of following her with his hang-dog eyes, his pouty mouth sort of drooping open.

I open my wallet and I have two twenties and a ten left and a couple loose fives wadded up like grocery receipts in the corner.

Vjay says he wants to pay for his.

"Nonsense," I say. "My treat."

"Nonsense yourself," he says, petulantly, and pays for his and mine and Del's half-finished bowl of tripe.

So we grab what's left and head outside.

There's a bunch of spool tables out here, PG&E cable spools, wood weathered gray and warped and splintery. We're carrying a pitcher apiece and the dinky barglasses they expect you to use.

The table we take is in an area of cool green dichondra, the sun warm and the grass still damp from fog and the overnight sprinklers. We pull another table over for later then sit down on the grass and lay back. The sky directly overhead is blue with slow white — incredibly white — cumulus clouds sliding lazily across. California, I'm thinking. Goddamn California. We finish the two half-pitchers and by this time we're feeling pretty good. We yell at Jimmy Wales through the screendoor for another of dark. I feel the tight warm buzz of bees in my head. This is some serious drinking now. Del winks at me. I wink back. I can feel the immense peacefulness of the day sinking down inside me, reaching out to the tips of my tingly fingertips. She comes out suddenly, with Vjay tagging along behind.

Aw hell, I say.

He's dogging her helplessly, head still all droopy and hangy.

He follows her out to the car. He wants to open the door for her. Then he wants to help pile her stuff in the car. She whirls on him. She says, What you think? Now we're married?

Del's watching. He gets up. I grab for him, tell him it's none of our business, but too late.



A couple of moments later Del returns, a strange look on his face. "You were right."

"What?"

"It ain't none of our business."

She's so mad now she's standing in the oystershell lot with her hands on her tight little hips and her butt in those turquoise capri pants. Vjay has this silly lobotomized sort of grin on his face that seems to infuriate her. I know it does me. Right out here for ever-body to see! she yells. She turns towards him and lifts a leg over his hip and starts moving. "Get it?" she says, clutching his waist. His eyes are filled with a dull glaze of happiness. He doesn't care. He's in love.

Del flops back on the grass laughing. She starts banging her crotch against Vjay faster now, as though intent upon wearing him out. Damp hair falls in limp curls across her forehead that she tries to blow out of her eyes. She has a grim smile. This is work, her face seems to say. Whereas, her face seems to say, the before was fun. She's staring over Vjay's right shoulder but her eyes aren't seeing us. They're off in some other part of the universe teaching Vjay how to do it correctly. Sweat beads on her upper lip and across her forehead. She's going to bang him into the next dimension if she has to. But he's clinging to her, happiness glazing his face. His face is tilted up and he grinning at the sun. He's in love.

Finally she quits. The sweat's pouring off her, turning her blouse translucent. You can see her breasts rising and falling. She claps her hands to her hips. She gives up. And stalks over to us.

Brushing a wet strand of hair out of her eyes, she looks pretty damn good. Not beautiful but serviceable, I'd classify it.

I hand her the two twenties and the ten for Vjay. I tell her Take it, none of us are doing this for free.



She gets a look on her face. "In the end," I say, "you always have to prove it, don't you."

Her eyes go away for a second and when they return they're glittery as though she's been crying. "What's that supposed to mean?"

I feel stupid trying to put into words something that can't be. Then I try to work my way out of it by using more words, and only make things worse. "That you can operate," I tell her. "With certain viability."

"In other words," her dark eyes snap at me, "compete with a man. In a man's world."

I look up at her. "Sorry," I mumble.

She sees then that I had not meant to be rude or insulting but had merely made the mistake that some men make when in the presence of an attractive woman, of trying to reduce everything to the level of conversation. So she smiles a little, then slips the square of money into her bra. "Thanks mister," she tells me.

I watch her go.

Maybe she called me mister because I haven't gotten laid. Or because I'd tried to explain. Or maybe something else entirely. Because we never really know, do we? But she didn't ask What about me. I halfway expected her to, after giving her the opening with those stupid remarks of mine. But she didn't. And I can't help respecting her even more for not pestering me with questions. I have the impression she's walking a razor too keen and subtle for me to apprehend. Or course this may just have been my projection of the situation. Maybe she doesn't feel any such thing at all. Maybe to her this was all as natural and unthought-provoking as breathing. I take a breath. Maybe—

Lay back with my arm across my eyes. Maybe I'm drunk.

I hear Vjay offer her a seat on the grass with a glass.

But she just stands here, holding her blouse away from her chest with two fingers and blowing her breath down to cool what's inside. When I open my eyes she's smiling at me.

I smile back.



~5~

About this time the family arrives. They arrive in two yellow taxis, my father, Mason, and mother and sisters. Even Ruth-Ann from over in Half Moon Bay. When my dad spots the girl standing here his face turns purple and white but he doesn't say a word.

Okay now here's the last part of the story.

My father comes from a family of accountants and actuaries whose name was ubiquitous with certain mechanical adding machines. However his dream was to go to art school—which he did, during the depression. A daring career choice. Then took drafting courses on the postwar GI Bill, which turned out to be a prescient decision.

It was during these same 50s that my great-grandfather died and his part of the family took the company public. But one of my uncles was a lawyer who convinced dad to accept cash in return for a quitclaim to Mason's portion of the shares—about double what a house cost at that time. Of course that stock is worth millions now. Millions. And the house is gone, sold, my mom and dad having since moved into something smaller and more frugal.

But the point is, it had been the greatest shock of his life—bigger than the Depression, than WWII—that theft, that moral embezzlement, that his own family should have done such to him. To this day it colors everything. So that now when he sees symptoms of this same disloyalty cropping up in his own kids—a good Catholic family whose half a dozen kids are all becoming individuals, wanting to leave home: Going Public. It brings back those old suspicions and distrust that life is basically treacherous, that family is traitorous and not to be trusted. Because he had the dreams. And his dream for us was for the family to stay together as a family and to implement all his dreams—

Like that's gonna happen.

He walks over and glares down at me and then at her and I'm lying here grinning back up at him. It's Del's birthday and I'm pretty wasted and feeling fuck the corporation. Del's got his eyes on the old man too, and he nudges me in the ribs and I can tell he's going to make some

wisecrack, which would have made it worse, maybe even ruined the party so I warn him to shut up. Maybe that makes me part of the family corporation, I don't know. The rest of the family arrives, piling out of a second taxi. Vjay stands a little ways off, watching dad from the shadows of the leaves of the trees shivering on his cheeks.

Then she's gone.

My father eases himself down in one of those cut-away barrels Jimmy Wales provides for seats out here. Dad sees the pitchers and empty glasses strewn on the grass and he gets the idea all right. He doesn't approve of his children drinking, although that certainly never stopped him. I remember a boardroom in a quonset along San Antonio Road when I was a kid, the darkly paneled wall that slid open to expose mirrored tiers of bottles in a glassy rainbow of colors. Eight engineers laboring over marble-topped labtables and a man named Shockley calling them traitors in the background. *So that's what happens*, I remember thinking. And now dad has to accept it in us. We aren't his damn kids anymore, and here's just one more proof.

He slumps forwards with his hands dangling between his knees and I lay back and wait for him to start up with it. I'm not about to give him the satisfaction of saying something first. I drain my glass and then reach for my helmet and yank it on. With its tinted faceshield I must look like some sort of incomprehensible insect. I gaze off down the street in the direction the girl disappeared. And about five blocks down there, quivering in the afternoon heat, spot her red T-bird parked in front of a neat tan bungalow with green and white striped awnings over the front windows.

My father's stares at Vjay then me. My name is Michael, but he only calls me that when he's mad and I'm in trouble, or he doesn't understand. This time it's both. But he doesn't want to bring it up now, spoil the family party. Besides, he's thinking maybe nobody else noticed. But my sisters have, and they're giggling. I don't believe my mother has. But maybe so. She's good at hiding things.



Now that the girl's gone though, Vjay sort of emerges from his trance and returns from the interior clutching two big beaded-with-moisture glass pitchers of dark. Behind him comes fat Jimmy, big loops of sweat under his arms and a V of damp where his shirt sticks to his belly. It isn't often he has a family come around. He winks at Del, then at me, then at Vjay. He doesn't wink at my dad. Vjay hangs his head sheepishly and pours himself a glass and foam boils over his fist and plops onto the thirsty grass. He drains the glass. His color's coming back. Vjay's getting over being in love.

And that's about all that happened today.

Oh, except for one last thing.

"No?" his face seems twisted in the livid flames. Either way, I realize, he'll never be satisfied. Well there's nothing I can do about that. We all have to do what we all have to do. *A man in a man's world.* So I yank the helmet off because suddenly it seems childish and absurd, as though I can't hold my own against my own father. I can see my motorcycle sitting there under a pool of pale yellow streetlight from the phone pole downlamp.

"No," I say. And I tell him Yeah. I've left St. Appolyon's too.

"Why?"

"Because," I say.

"Because what?"

His face seems enormously old, and tired. Do I even know this man?

"Because," I say.

Ice Altes Hills 1967  
Football College 1968

You can see it. Eating and eating away at him, until finally he just has to ask. It's late and the family's gathering itself to leave and Jimmy Wales has come out and lit a line of Tiki torches and the air is filled with a taste of combusted petrochemical. Bugs whorl and flutter and flail sizzling out of the flames, while others circle impatiently for their turn to die. There's a settled complacent atmosphere to the dregs of the evening.

"Did you?" he just has to know. My mother and sisters are waiting out there in the taxis but he has to know. "Too?"

Vjay grins back and forth at the two of us, smiling incomprehensibly. He's pretty much over being in love.

"I know these two," his pale hand flutters like a moth diving in and out of flamelight, "but I want to know if you did. Too."

And not just know, but how come. Like everybody else, how come. Only the girl had had the decency not to ask, yet she was the one who'd had the most right.

But not my father. Oh no. Because we're still his little kids.

No, I shake my head. I unsnap the faceshield so just the helmet covers my head like a second skull.



